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ABSTRACT

This study examined characteristics of programs in which students were enrolled to determine which activities were most effective in dealing with dropouts. The study attempted to validate program components that have previously been associated with retentive capacity. Seventy-six exemplary programs for dropouts were selected to participate in the study. Directors of the 76 programs were mailed a survey that included a list of 18 program descriptors that they were asked to rank in order of importance for dropout prevention program success. Surveys were returned from 44 of the 76 programs, and represented 26,052 dropout students. The four program descriptors that were ranked as the most effective in working with dropouts were self-concept development, work attitudes/habits, interpersonal/life skills, and motivation. The four program descriptors that were ranked as the least necessary were interagency cooperation, job development, staff upgrading, and community service. The teaching factors considered to be extremely important to retaining dropouts reflected those skills that are part of fundamental classroom management: rules are established and clearly communicated, and performance standards are clearly communicated. Respondents also indicated that it was extremely important that the teacher was considered approachable. In addition, respondents rated counseling services as important. Based on the results of this survey, recommendations were made for improving dropout prevention programs. (KC)

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Indicators of Effective Programming for School to Work Transition Skills Among Dropouts

Illinois
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The topic of the high school dropout has been widely investigated but the research has failed to produce results that will effectively help school districts increase their retentive capacity. The research has typically focused on the characteristics of dropouts, reasons for dropping out, characteristics of the teacher, problems with the classroom environment, and curriculum modifications appropriate to dropout prevention. The studies that have focused on the curriculum and the classroom environment hold the most promise for the school practitioner. The results of these studies suggest that environmental factors can be changed to produce optimum rententive results. It is within this arena that vocational education has been identified as having the capacity to create a more positive learning environment for the potential dropout. Unfortunately, these studies typically suffer from four methodological problems. First, students generally drop out of school before they have the opportunity to participate in vocational classes. Second, vocational education does not include dropout retention as one of its major purposes; therefore, its programs are not specifically designed to address the dropout problem but seem to do so as a byproduct. Third, there are problems with the determination of who is a vocational student and who is not. Fourth, it is difficult, if not impossible, to design a study to statistically control for the variety of student characteristics prior to placement. The data is not available for many of the important

pre-enrollment characteristics of students for which controls should be imposed (Mertens, Seitz, & Cox, 1983). This paper will examine selected environmental and curricular factors that could be used by educators to increase the retentive capacity of vocational programs among high school dropouts. The term dropout will be used to indicate those students who have dropped out of school or who have been identified as having the potential to drop out of high school.

Characteristics of the Dropout

A large volume of research has been conducted in an attempt to identify the major characteristics of students who drop out of high school (Peng, 1983; Howell & Freese, 1982; Rumberger, 1981; Maurer, 1982; Shaw, 1979; Novak & Dougherty, 1979; McNally, 1977; Mertens, 1983; Nam. Rhodes & Herriot, 1968; Bachman, 1970). It has been suggested that further research in the area is fruitless because student characteristics have been found to have little predictive ability or explanatory power (Darkenwald, 1981). The research has been useful in identifying potential dropouts by the time they attain the legal age for leaving school, but has been less effective in identifying students who were in trouble at a sufficiently early age to give them the help they needed (Novak & Dougherty, 1979). Furthermore, such research suggests that the problem lies with the student and with personal characteristics over which educators have little control (such as socio-economic background, race, religion, sex, age). Since there is little that can be done to change the students's characteristics, the recommendations that result from the research have little impact

in educational remediation.

Reasons for Dropping Out

It is difficult to accurately assess the reasons students drop out from high school. Too often, students cite socially acceptable reasons or superficial explanations for leaving school. Students may be unable to conceptualize and articulate the historical, interpersonal dynamics that led to the decision to drop out of school. The most common reasons given for leaving school are work, financial need, transportation, and personal needs. It has been suggested that the deeper reasons include isolation, boredom, dissonance, and irrelevancy (American College Testing Program, 1978).

Within two years of leaving school, most students report that dropping out was not a good decision. Dropping out of school was associated with significantly higher unemployment rates. Female dropouts also experienced a significant lower hourly rate of pay. Male dropouts experienced more weeks of unemployment and worked fewer hours per week (Mertens, Seitz & Cox, 1983).

Retentive Power of Vocational Education

Vocational education has been one of several suggested programmatic responses to the dropout problem. The results of the research are mixed. Nevertheless, there are several indications that vocational education does in fact have a retentive ability. Mertens (1983) reported that potential dropouts were more likely to finish tenth grade if they were in vocational education. For those students who remained in school after they reached the legal

age, a retentive power was found for the remaining high risk group. This holding power was higher for vocational education than for other programs in the high school.

Grasso and Shea (1979) reported a positive retention effect for female students enrolled in vocational education. A retentive effect was also reported for business students, cooperative education students and vocational students at the tenth and twelfth grade levels (Mertens, McElwain, Garcia, & Whitmore, 1980).

Given the methodological problems of research design in the area of dropout prevention, the National Commission for Employment Policy (1981) recommended that future studies should examine individual students and their activities rather than analyze averages over nonhomogeneous groups. This approach was used in the present study. The purpose of this study was to examine characteristics of programs in which students were enrolled and to determine which activities were most effective in dealing with dropouts. The study attempted to validate program components that have previously been associated with retentive capacity.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

Seventy-six exemplary programs for dropouts were selected to participate in the study. The programs were identified from a study conducted by the Wisconsin Vocational Studies Center entitled Effective Programming For Youth: The Education-Work Connection (Novak, Wehlage, & Wong, 1981). Two hundred and

seventy-four (274) programs were identified by Research Coordinating Unit Directors for Vocational Education and by CETA Supervisors/Prime Sponsors throughout the United States. These individuals were asked to select activities, strategies or programs they felt were effective in preparing in-school and/or out-of-school youth to make the transition from education to successful employment. The 274 sites were contacted and asked to identify components included in their program. The 274 responses were reviewed and 76 programs were identified that specifically served students who were dropouts or potential dropouts from high school. These 76 exemplary programs were used as the sample of this study.

Procedure

A survey was designed and mailed to the directors of the 76 programs. The survey included questions concerning the status and size of the program, the number of dropouts served by the program, and the funding source of the program. A copy of the exemplary program report developed by Novak, Wehlage and Wong (1981) accompanied each survey. The report included a list of 18 program descriptors. The survey requested each director to rank four program descriptors that were the most effective in working with dropout students. Directors were also asked to rank four program descriptors that were the least necessary in working with dropout students. The eighteen descriptors included recruitment, basic academic skills, job skills training, interpersonal and/or life skills, self concept development, work attitudes/habits, motivation, parent involvement, career exploration/awareness,

career counseling, employability skills, work experience, community service, placement, job development, staff upgrading, interagency coordinators, and support services.

The second section of the survey contained a list of twelve program factors that emerged from a review of the literature. Each factor had been identified as critical in dealing successfully with dropout students by various researchers: financial aid, support from other students, (Carvell & Carvell, 1981); realistic training related to jobs (Carvell & Carvell, 1981; Irish, 1978); counseling services (National Advisory Council on Supplementary Centers and Services, 1975; Carvell & Carvell, 1981); content of program meets expectations (Lewis, 1971; Lam & Wong, 1974; Irish 1978); teachers talk to students as equals (Davis, 1966 in Darkenwald, 1981); teachers are approachable (Lam & Wong, 1974); learning outcomes are clearly defined (Irish, 1978); methods are appropriate for the task, sequence of learning is defined and communicated, rules are established and communicated, and performance standards are clearly communicated (Carvell & Carvell, 1981). Program directors were asked to rate each program factor on a five point Likert scale (1 = not important and 5 = extremely important)

RESULTS

Surveys were returned from 44 of the 76 programs (57.9%) and represented 26,Ø52 dropout students. Twenty-five (56.8%) of the programs were still operational. The 19 programs that were no longer in existence reported that the program had been

Table One

Most Effective Program Descriptors

	Number Who Ranked	Number 1 Rank	$\bar{X}$
Self Concept Development	26	16	1.80
Work Attitudes/Habits	18	4	2.27
Interpersonal/Life Skills	18	3	3.05
Motivation	15	5	2.13
Work Experience	14	2	2.64
Employability Skills	13	2	3.15
Basic Academic Skills	11	3	2.09
Job Training Skills	9	1	2.44
Career Exploration/Awareness	8	4	2.00
Job Placement	8	1	

discontinued following the phase-out of CETA; reinstitution of the program through the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) was anticipated by most respondents. The majority of the respondents reported multiple funding sources including JTPA and/or CETA (56.8%); local education funds (40.9%); and state agency funds (31.8%) such as commerce and community affairs, vocational education, or welfare grants. Three programs received additional funding from private industry. Twenty-two programs included a teacher inservice component. Ten programs did not provide inservice and 12 programs did not respond to the question.

The four program descriptors that were ranked as the most effective in working with dropouts were: self concept development, work attitudes/habits, interpersonal/life skills, and motivation. Self concept development was also most frequently ranked as the most effective descriptor. It was ranked as number one by sixteen directors. Table 1 contains a complete ranking of the eighteen program descriptors.

The four program descriptors that were ranked as the least necessary in working with dropouts were: interagency cooperation, job development, staff upgrading, and community service (see Table Two). Interagency cooperation was also most frequently ranked as least necessary. It was ranked as number 18 by 8 of the respondents. Although parent involvement and job placement were not included in the lowest four descriptors, they were ranked as the least necessary component by 5 and 4 respondents respectively. The average ranking for these two descriptors also placed them among the least necessary components.

Table Two

LEAST NECESSARY -- Most Frequently Ranked

	Number Who Ranked	Number 1 Rank	$\bar{X}$
Interagency Cooperation	18	8	2.11
Job Development	14	2	2.86
Staff Upgrading	14	4	2.43
Community Service	13	4	2.31
Recruitment	11	1	2.82
Parent Involvement	11	5	2.18
Career Exploration/Awareness	8	2	2.38
Interpersonal/Life Skills	7	2	2.43
Placement	7	4	2.14
Support Services	6	1	2.33
Job Skills Training	5	0	2.60
Work experience	4	1	2.25
Basic Academic Skills	4	0	2.75
Work Attitudes/Habits	3	0	3.67
Motivation	3	1	2.33
Employability Skills	3	0	3.67
Self Concept Development	2	0	2.00

Table three contains the results of the program factor data analysis. The results of the survey indicated three program factors that were considered to be "extremely important" in retaining dropouts: the teacher was seen as approachable (4.69), rules were established and communicated (4.69), and performance standards were clearly communicated (4.60). Seven factors were reported to be "important" in retaining dropouts: learning outcomes were clearly defined (4.29); methods were appropriate for the task (4.26); counseling services were available (4.23); content of program met expectations (4.23); realistic training was provided related to jobs (4.20); teachers talked to students as equals (4.12); and the sequence of learning was defined and communicated (4.12). Two program factors were reported to be "somewhat important:" support from other students (3.46) and financial aid (3.43).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study must be placed within the context of the sample. The participants were selected from programs that had successfully helped high school dropouts make the transition from school to employment. The programs were identified by different individuals in different states. It is therefore probable that varying criterion were used to determine which programs were "exemplary." Nevertheless, the programs published by Novak, Wehlage and Wong (1981) were all considered to be exemplary by at least one individual that had major administrative responsibilities for vocational education or employment training

Table Three

Program Factors Important in Dropout Retention

Program Factor	Mean (X)	Ranking
Teachers "approachable"	4.69	1
Rules are established and communicated	4.69	1
Performance standards are clearly communicated	4.60	3
Learning outcomes are clearly defined	4.29	4
Methods appropriate for task	4.26	5
Counseling services	4.23	6
Content of program meets expectations	4.23	6
Realistic training related to jobs	4.20	8
Teachers talk to students as equals	4.12	9
Sequence of learning is defined and communicated	4.12	9
Support from other students	3.46	11
Financial aid	3.43	12

in a state. Given the limitations resulting from variation in selection criteria, the data can be analyzed from the following perspective: the factors selected were those considered necessary/unnecessary by directors of effective programs. The distinction being made is critical. The respondents were not primarily researchers, general educators, classroom teachers, students, or any other at-large population. The respondents were those who were considered to be doing a "good job" by leaders in the state.

It is interesting that the four program descriptors selected as the most effective by the respondents were all within the affective domain: self-concept development, work attitudes, interpersonal/life skills, and motivation. These four descriptors were considered to be the factors that were most effective in working with dropout students or potential dropout students. Program activities that focused on the affective domain were reported as more effective than the basic content areas: work experience, employability skills, basic academic skills, and job training skills.

The most surprising result of the study was related to those descriptors considered least necessary in working with dropouts or potential dropouts. The respondents of exemplary programs clearly identified interagency cooperation as the least necessary activity in their dropout program. This result is incongruent with the emphasis given to interagency cooperation at the state and federal level. There are several possible explanations for this finding. The respondents may have had little experience with interagency

cooperation and therefore do not appreciate its potential. On the other hand, the respondents may have attempted to cooperate with other agencies and found the benefits to be minimal. A third consideration might be that effective programs do not find it necessary to seek assistance because they are already experiencing a high level of success.

Another surprising finding was the relatively low importance given to staff upgrading. This factor was ranked among the three least necessary descriptors of an effective program. Staff inservice was reported by only 50% of the programs. It is possible that staff upgrading was ranked low because the exemplary programs already employed high quality staff members. In contrast, staff inservice might have been neglected due to time constraints, financial limitations, or low administrative priority.

The teaching factors considered to be extremely important in retaining dropouts reflected those skills that are part of fundamental classroom management: (1) rules are established and clearly communicated and (2) performance standards are clearly communicated. Respondents also indicated that it was extremely important that the teacher was considered approachable. This factor is related to the emphasis given to the affective domain by the respondents.

The second cluster of program factors identified as important was heavily loaded with basic teaching skills: learning outcomes were clearly defined; methods were appropriate for the task; content met student expectations; realistic training was provided,

and the sequence of learning was defined and communicated. In addition to these traditional teaching factors, two affective areas emerged as important: (1) counseling services were available and (2) the teachers talked to students as equals. Counseling services was not previously included in the top eight descriptors of effective programs. However, these same respondents considered counseling skills to be very important in dropout prevention.

Another interesting finding was that the two variables considered extremely important by students (Carvell & Carvell, 1981) were ranked as the two lowest factors by the directors of exemplary programs: (1) support from other students and (2) financial aid. The emphasis on financial aid appears to be dependent upon the function of the program. Eleven respondents rated financal aid as extremely important and nine respondents rated it as not important. (Other respondents selected an intermediate rating). Given the dissonance in the student responses reported by Carvell and Carvell (1981) and the program director ratings given in this study, there is a need for additional research to validate the apparent discrepancy in teacher and student priorities.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Affective areas were found to be the most effective descriptors of exemplary programs to help dropouts with school to work transition. Skill training areas were rated as a secondary cluster of skills that described effective programs. Interagency

cooperation was reported to be the least necessary service in assisting dropouts with school to work transition skills.

Basic, fundamental teaching skills were found to be extremely important in retaining dropouts in exemplary programs. However, it was necessary to complement these skills with a teacher who was considered approachable and who talked to students as equals. Counseling services were also considered to be an important factor in dropout retention. Inservice education was not widely practiced in exemplary programs nor was it considered to be a vital program component.

Given the results of this study of exemplary programs, the following recommendations are suggested.

(1) Pre-service and inservice education should continue to emphasize the importance of fundamental teaching skills as a necessary component of dropout prevention.

(2) The curriculum should include activities that will help students enhance self concept development, increase motivation, and refine daily living skills.

(3) Skill training in vocational education and basic academic skills should be provided in realistic settings related to jobs. The learning outcomes, performance standards, and sequence of learning should be clearly defined and communicated to students. Competency based education should be considered as one format that meets these expectations.

(4) Counseling services should be provided to students to assist them with career planning and with development of

affective skills.

(5) Behavioral role models should be provided to assist students develop skills in the affective domain.

(6) Teacher inservice should encourage the utilization of techniques in which the teacher is perceived as approachable.

(7) Additional research should be conducted to determine if a discrepancy exists in student and teacher perceptions of effective practices and program factors.

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